Description Is a Drag, and Vice Versa: Issues with Vocabulary Control

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ABSTRACT

How do controlled vocabularies address transgender topics? This talk explores the use of hierarchical taxonomic structures to describe people's often-fluid gender identities and sexuality, particularly the lack of accurate and appropriate language in most commonly used subject thesauri, and how the lack of this accurate and appropriate language can affect potential users. More specifically, this refers to individuals who identify as gender-nonconforming. This term, as defined by the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, refers to "people who do not follow other people's ideas or stereotypes about how they should look or act based on the female or male sex they were assigned at birth." The phrase is frequently used as an umbrella term that encompasses a wide variety of gender identities, including transsexual, drag queen, genderqueer, and butch.

Many standard vocabularies have a long and complicated history with regards to prescriptive access points for marginalized groups and sexualities. This talk offers a historical overview of the ways in which authorized vocabularies have differed from vernacular language commonly used by community members and LGBTQ scholars to describe their own lives, and explores well- and lesser-known subject vocabularies such as the Library of Congress Subject Headings, Medical Subject Headings, terminology used by community archives and libraries, and tags assigned by LGBTQ people when describing their personal collections. The proposal builds on research by Melissa Adler, Sanford Berman, Ellen Greenblatt, Matt Johnson, Patrick Keilty, and Hope Olson.

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